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ABSTRACT

A case study addressed (1) the relationship between language ability and the use of top-level organizational strategies that focus on the macrostructure of written text, and (2) the comparative use of these strategies when reading expository texts in native language (L1) and second language (L2). Subjects were five Hispanic English as a second language (ESL) students in an urban bilingual community college. In each of two individual testing sessions, students read silently an expository text, and were asked first to write down and then to dictate into a tape recorder all they could remember without referring to the text. Written and oral recall protocols were produced in Spanish after the Spanish text and in English after the English text. The second session concluded with an open-ended interview that produced a profile of each student's perceptions and memories of their own Spanish and English reading processes. Results showed L2 reading ability did not improve as a function of increased ability in the second language. The students who lacked an efficient approach to written text in L1 exhibited less sensitivity to discourse constraints when reading in L2 in spite of acquired language ability. (HOD)

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Language Ability and the Use of Top-Level Organizational Strategies

RATIONALE

Research on the process of reading a second language, particularly among adult L2 learners, has long underscored the role of language ability in effective reading. Yorio's (1971) research with adult Spanish speakers concluded that difficulties in L2 reading can basically be traced back to L1 interference and lack of L2 knowledge. Later research conducted by Clarke (1979, 1980) with a similar population led him to posit the existence of a "language ceiling" which short-circuits effective comprehension by confining the reader to word and sentence levels of discourse. Further support for Clarke's conclusions were provided by Cziko (1978,1980) who identified low L2 proficiency as the

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primary cause of an L2 reader's inability to make full use of the syntactic, semantic and discourse constraints which serve as important sources of information in written text.

Such findings, when viewed within the theoretical framework of schema research (Adams & Collins, 1979), present an L2 reader's ability to employ an interactive top-down/bottom-up approach to reading as a function of L2 ability. A primary assumption in this research, however, is that once the limitations of the language ceiling are overcome, adult L2 readers are free to utilize those constraints operating at discourse levels of text as guides to global comprehension. Implicit is a second assumption that adult L2 readers, by virtue of their maturity, are proficient readers in their native language. The research here reported questioned both these assumptions.

METHODOLOGY

Using a case study approach, this study addressed two major issues: (1) the relationship between language ability and the use of top-level organizational strategies which focus on the macrostructure of written text; and (2) the comparative use of these strategies when reading expository texts in L1 and L2.

Five hispanic ESL learners in an urban bilingual community college were selected on the basis of performance on cloze tasks in Spanish and English which, based on interpretive criteria established by Bormuth (1967), qualified

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them as having advanced language ability levels in L1 and L2. In addition, each student participant was to have demonstrated a minimum grade equivalent score of 10.0 on the vocabulary section of the California Test of Basic Skills (Level 4).

Table 1

Profile of Student Participants

SUBJECT	Mario	Henry	Eugenia	Luis	Martha
AGE	21 yrs..	19 yrs..	23 yrs..	23 yrs.	24 yrs.
TIME IN U.S.	1 yr. 6 mos.	2 yrs. 4 mos.	4 yrs.	2 yrs.	5 yrs.
COUNTRY	Panama	El Salvador	Dominican Republic	Puerto Rico	Dominican Republic
EDUCATION	HS	GED	GED	HS	HS
CTBS VOC. (Level 4)	10.9	10.0	10.6	10.1	10.0
SPANISH CLOZE	.70	.76	.86	.76	.64
ENGLISH CLOZE	.66	.64	.66	.72	.50

In each of two individual testing sessions, students silently read an expository text, and were asked to first write down and then to dictate into a tape recorder all they could remember from the passage without being able to refer back to the text. Written and oral recall protocols were produced in Spanish after the Spanish text and in English after the English text. The second session concluded with an open-ended interview which produced a profile of each

student's perceptions and memories of their own Spanish and English reading processes. Topics for each of the reading passages were based on the results of an Interest and Prior Knowledge Survey, and were drawn from general psychology texts in Spanish and English judged as having 11-12th grade reading levels.

Following the top-down procedures outlined in Meyer's (1974, 1982) model of discourse analysis, each text was first analyzed for its top-level structure of relationships and was found to be organized according to a description:attribution schema. Each text was then analyzed for the structure of rhetorical content and relationships which characterized the macrolevel of each discourse. Even though Meyer's model was developed for English passages as read by native speakers, it was felt to be an appropriate analysis tool for the Spanish passage as well given this study's focus on textual relationships beyond the sentence level of discourse -- higher level relationships which are here construed to be more a function of the discipline of a text than they are of any particular language. Meyer's model also permitted the evaluation of the reader's use of the writer's top-level structure, and the assessment of total rhetorical recall in student protocols by numerically cataloging the rhetorical relationship and content units comprising each text's structure. Top-level structure (TLS) scores were based on the criteria listed in Table 2.

Table 3

Scoring Criteria for Evaluating Students' Use of the Writer's Structure in Written and Oral Recall

Assigned Structure Score	Passage Structure Description: Attribution
*10	Explicit statement: "several characteristics will be discussed" and list of 4 attributes
* 9	Simply lists 4 attributes about topic, related to the passage
* 8	Explicit statement and list of 3 attributes
* 7	Simply lists 3 attributes about topic, related to the passage
* 6	Explicit statement and list of 2 attributes
* 5	Simply lists 2 attributes about topic, related to the passage
4	Uses some other non-attribution description structure
3	Uses some other non-description structure
2	Lists 1 attribute about topic, related to the passage
1	Lists 1 or more attributes about topic, but these not related to the passage
0	Lists no attributes about topic, no apparent organization

*Student credited with using writer's top-level structure

(Adapted from Brandt, 1978)

Rhetorical Recall (RR) scores, reported as percentages, were based on 66 scorable units in the Spanish passage, and 55 scorable units in the English passage. These scores, recorded for each recall mode in Table 3, served as guides to the development of the five case study descriptions that comprised the core of this research (Benedetto, 1984).

Table 3

SUMMARY DATA

	Language Ability		Rhetorical Recall and Top-Level Structure Scores Mode of Recall							
			(Spw)		(Spo)		(Ew)		(Eo)	
Subject	Spanish Cloze	English Cloze	RR	TLS	RR	TLS	RR	TLS	RR	TLS
Mario	.70	.66	80.3	10	89.4	10	65.5	10	54.5	10
Henry	.76	.64	33.3	7	51.5	7	74.5	10	74.5	10
Eugenia	.86	.66	21.2	4	21.2	4	40.0	4	43.6	4
Luis	.76	.72	13.6	4	22.7	4	34.5	4	52.7	4
Martha	.64	.50	10.6	0	10.6	0	10.9	0	10.9	0

DISCUSSION

However comparable the students in this study are in terms of their language ability, the summary data suggest they are not equally comparable in terms of their capacities to meet the cognitive demands of the reading and recall tasks.

Based on the L1 data, it appears that some native speakers develop efficient, high-order organizational strategies which both supplement and complement their acquired levels of language when reading. Others, by contrast, appear frozen at interim stages of a developing reading proficiency which have neither the depth nor the sophistication required for successful interaction with the L1 text. This lack of parallel development in the linguistic and cognitive domains of the L1 reading process appears to bear great significance for L2 reading as demonstrated by the participants in this study. For even though L2 readers may acquire a second language ability which permits them to rely less on their first, they seem to continue to rely on whatever strategies have been developed for use in L1 when reading in L2.

Thus, contrary to previous findings in the L2 literature, these summary data imply that L2 reading ability does not necessarily improve as a function of increased ability in the second language. Only those students who are strategic readers in their own language are able to employ a bottom-up/top-down approach to L2 reading once they have overcome the limitations of the language ceiling. Those students, on the other hand, who lack an efficient approach to written text in L1 exhibit less sensitivity to discourse constraints when reading in L2 in spite of acquired language ability. These readers appear subject to the additional limitations imposed by another, a "cognitive ceiling" which short-circuits their reading processes at yet another level.

A second significant feature that emerges from these five case analyses is that the top-level strategy seems to be one which transcends both the language of the discourse and the mode of recall. Readers who are able to perceive the writer's TLS and use it as a retrieval plan for textual recall do so whether they are reading in L1 or L2, or responding through written or oral recall (Mario, Henry). Readers who follow a simplified TLS (Eugenia, Luis) are less sensitive to critical information in each text and produce recalls which are limited in scope. The one reader who fails to utilize any perceivable TLS (Martha) focuses on minimal low-level information and fails to achieve any global comprehension of either text. Differences in L1 and L2 recalls in both written and oral modes seem to allude to the contributory roles of the psychological, social and motivational forces which establish a reader's proximity to the language and culture of the text.

Finally, the summary data also raise questions as to the validity of cloze as a measure of overall reading comprehension, as readers who perform quite successfully on cloze tasks do not always perform equally well on reading and recall tasks. Such performance seems congruent with conclusions reached in three experimental studies conducted by Shanahan, Kamil and Tobin (1982) which present cloze as insensitive to intersentential information integration and, thus, unable to measure global comprehension.

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